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ABSTRACT

A three-stage lesson sequence that used story grammars to teach plot development has been proved successful with a group of eight above average third grade students reading Deborah and James Howe's "Bunnicula." The first stage was a training unit designed to familiarize children with a typical story grammar's parts: a theme and plot consisting of the setting, goal, problem, attempt to solve the problem, solution, and reaction. The novel was introduced in the second stage and a master story grammar chart was constructed as a basis for the review, prediction, and summarization tasks that guided children's reading. In the third stage, children identified which chapters dealt with particular grammar parts on the master story grammar chart. In doing this, they came to recognize the interrelation of the chapters and gained a metacognitive awareness of the novel. Children responded enthusiastically when asked about the story grammar technique, saying that it helped them understand the novel better and gave their reading purpose and organization. In addition, this strategy helps teachers write better study questions, improve the reading comprehension of less advanced readers, and aid students in writing their own stories. (Master story grammar charts are included.) (JD)

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RELATING THE PARTS TO THE WHOLE IN NOVEL READING: USING STORY GRAMMARS TO TEACH PLOT DEVELOPMENT IN NOVELS

Story grammars have proven to be a valuable classroom reading strategy. Teachers have used story grammars to write better questions, to improve the comprehension of their poorer readers, and to help students with their story writing. This manuscript describes a method of teaching plot development in novels using a story grammar framework. A rationale for the effectiveness of story grammars in teaching novels is given, as well as a three stage lesson sequence that was piloted with a group of above average third graders.

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Story grammars have had a major impact on teaching reading in the classroom. Although story grammars originated as a research tool for analyzing stories (Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Rummelhart, 1975; Stein and Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977), classroom teachers have found the concept of a story grammar to be useful in their daily teaching. Teachers have used story grammars as a way to write more effective questions to assess story comprehension (Marshall, 1983), to help students with their writing (Gordon and Braun, 1983) and to improve the comprehension of poorer readers (Fitzgerald and Spiegel, 1983).

We have found another use for story grammars: story grammars provide an excellent means for teaching plot development in novels. In our work with elementary students we have found that while they are relatively good at understanding the individual chapters of a novel, they have difficulty in relating the action of each chapter to the novel's overall structure. Children focus on each chapter as an intact unit and appear to forget that it should contribute to the overall story line. By using a story grammar frame to organize their reading of the book, we hope to help children recognize the development of a novel's plot.

Before discussing our work, it may be well to review what a story grammar is and our rationale for using it with novels. A story grammar is a way of looking at the structure of narrative text. While a variety of story grammar types exist in the

literature, a typical listing of a story grammar's parts includes a theme and a plot which is made up of a series of episodes. These episodes consist of the setting (time, place, and characters), a goal (something the characters wish to achieve), a problem (something that prohibits the characters from achieving this goal), attempts to solve the problem (what the characters do), the solution to the problem and the reaction (how the characters feel at the end of the solution).

In our judgement a novel, although a highly complex form of narrative, consists of these same parts. A novel can be seen as a series of small story grammars which contribute to an overall story grammar for the whole work. Too often in the chapter by chapter approach used by teachers in working with novels, this overall story grammar is forgotten. We developed this approach to help students visualize each chapter's individual contribution to the whole novel.

This three stage approach was piloted with a group of eight above average third graders. The novel used in this unit was Deborah and James Howe's Bunnicula, a story about a vampire rabbit. The entire novel unit was completed within a three week time period.

Stage 1: Preparing for the Novel

The first stage was a training unit designed to familiarize the children with the parts of the story grammar. The parts of

the grammar were listed on the board and then defined. Examples of each part were given, using a story familiar to the students, e.g., The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Students were then given practice identifying the story grammar parts in stories that were well below their instructional level. This was to insure that they could master the story grammar concepts without interference due to the difficulty of the material being read. When the children could accurately identify the parts of the story grammar in their reading, the novel was then introduced.

Stage 2: Organizing the Novel Reading

The thrust of this novel unit was to help children gain an understanding of how plot develops in a novel. To this end a large wall chart was constructed with the chapter numbers on its horizontal axis and the story grammar parts along its vertical axis. See Table 1 for a partial chart. This master story grammar chart was used as the basis for the review, prediction and summarization tasks that were used to guide the childrens' reading. In the review component, children were referred to the chart and asked specific questions about the preceding chapter. These questions emphasized the parts of the story grammar. For example, the children were asked who the characters were in the previous chapter, what the problem was and whether the problem was solved or not. In the prediction component, the children were asked to take these same story grammar parts and use them

to predict what would happen in the chapter they were about to read: who will the characters be, where will the action take place, how will the problem be solved. The children then read the chapter to answer their predictions. After reading the chapter, the accuracy of the students' predictions was checked and the chapter was then summarized by completing the chart.

Through this review/prediction/summarization sequence, we hoped to help children see how chapters are interrelated. For example, when reviewing the story grammar parts for Chapter 5, the children remembered that the Reaction dealt with Chester the cat's determination to stop the vampire rabbit, Bunnicula. The children then predicted that this Reaction would become the Goal of Chapter 6, and that the Attempts of Chapter 6 would be ways to stop a vampire rabbit (e.g. by stringing garlic around the rabbit's cage).

Stage 3: Examining the Plot Development of the Novel

After the novel was finished, we focused our concluding activities on how and where the parts of the story grammar were developed. The parts of the grammar were listed and the children were asked to refer to the master story grammar chart to find which chapters of the book dealt with a particular story grammar aspect. As the children examined the master chart, a pattern emerged. Chapters 1 and 2 dealt primarily with character development and setting, the central chapters dealt with the

exposition of the problem and attempts to solve the problem. The final chapter dealt with the solution and reactions of the main characters. See Table 2 for the story grammar for the whole novel. As one of our students noted, "Hey, we're going right down the line!" When asked why they thought the authors had organized the novel in this way, one student replied, "It makes sense. You can't talk about goals until you find out who the people are."

Was this approach successful? It certainly seemed so to us. Just from the discussions, we could tell that the children were using the master chart to predict what should come next in the novel. However, we decided to get input from the students themselves. We asked them if using the story grammar helped them understand the novel better. The children were enthusiastic in their agreement. As Aaron put it, "When you read a book, most people don't really think about the characters and the setting and how they solve stuff. They read it for something to do. It (the story grammar) gives you the information." Nathan added, "By using this it's easier to make a structure of what's going on." From these remarks, it is apparent that the children had recognized the value of the story grammar strategy applied to a novel. They were using it to give a purpose and to organize their reading, demonstrating a metacognitive awareness.

In conclusion, we need to add that this is by no means a

complete plan for a novel unit since its focus is limited solely to plot development. Other aspects of a novel unit to be considered would include necessary background concepts, vocabulary, character delineation, etc. However, this unit was effective for helping the children visualize plot development: where the action came from, and where it was going. Should this approach be repeated over time, the children will gain a much better understanding of the construction of a novel.

Table 1

Master Story Grammar Chart for Bunnicula

Chapters 5 and 6

	Chapter 5: "Chester Goes Into His Act"	Chapter 6: "Harold Helps Out"
Setting:Time	Morning	Later the same day
Place	The Monroes' kitchen	Kitchen/living room
Characters	The Monroe family Chester the cat	Mr. and Mrs. Monroe Harold the dog Chester the cat Bunnicula
Problems/ Goals	Chester wants to warn the Monroe family that Bunnicula is a vampire.	Chester wants to stop Bunnicula.
Attempts/ Solutions	Chester tries to warn the family by acting like a vampire.	Chester strings garlic around Bunnicula's cage, pounds a steak into his heart, and tries to throw water on him.

(table continues)

	Chapter 5: "Chester Goes Into His Act"	Chapter 6: "Harold Helps Out"
Reactions	The family thinks that Chester is acting strange, maybe he is sick. Chester realizes that he must take matters into his own hands and stop Bunnicula.	The Monroes give Chester a bath because he smells like garlic. Harold gets to eat the steak. Bunnicula just sleeps through everything.

Table 2

Story Grammar for the Whole Novel

Story Grammar	Bunnicula By Deborah and James Howe	Where The Information Was Found
Setting	Usually in the kitchen, living room, or library	Chapters 1 and 2
Characters	The Monroe family, Harold the dog, Chester the cat, and Bunnicula, the vampire rabbit	Chapter 2
Problem	Bunnicula is a vampire who sucks the juice out of vegetables causing them to turn white.	Chapters 3 and 4
Attempts To Solve The Problem	Chester tries to warn the family and attempts to stop Bunnicula by starving him.	Chapters 5, 6, and 7
Solution	The family notices how strangely Chester is	Chapters 8 and 9

(table continues)

Story Grammar	Bunnicula By Deborah and James Howe	Where The Information Was Found
	behaving and that Bunnicula is losing weight so they take Chester to a cat psych-ologist and Bunnicula to the vet where he is put on a vegetable juice diet.	
Reaction	Bunnicula and Harold become good friends and Chester starts reading psychology books. The Monroes are happy because no more vegetables are turning white.	Chapter 9

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